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Washington, DC-- At a press conference today, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) announced that she was an original cosponsor of the Restoring Emergency Services to Protect Our Nation from Disasters (RESPOND) Act of 2006, to remove the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) because the agency has a "dysfunctional disaster structure and management that cannot be mended inside." Norton, who is ranking member of the subcommittee which has primary jurisdiction over the national disaster mission of FEMA, stood as part of the "Big Four," the chairs and ranking members of the full committee and subcommittee of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. Norton said that FEMA's problems were "so pervasive and deep that there is almost no confidence that the agency, even now, can meet the hurricane season due next month." Norton, who originally favored placing FEMA in DHS, said she could not turn away from the evidence from Hurricane Katrina and five FEMA hearings and markups which she said showed that disaster preparedness funding has been cut every year since the agency was absorbed into DHS, and that the administration, understandably concerned about 9/11, had succeeded in getting huge cuts in the hazard mitigation grant program, among the other problems that contributed to the Katrina disaster. She said that at those hearings, local officials complained that they had been diverted from natural disaster prevention activities, and that grant programs were disproportionately terrorism related. Norton said that despite the annual certainty of hurricanes, floods, tornadoes and other natural disasters, three out of four preparedness grants had gone to terrorism related activities. "Although emphasis on terrorism was fully justified after 9/11, we know that billion of dollars were not distributed on a risk basis," she said. "Natural disasters will almost inevitably lose out in the competition between terrorism prevention and disaster management if FEMA remains under DHS management."

Norton said that FEMA had regressed to the "hapless and inefficient" agency it was before James Lee Witt, who was in office during the Clinton administration as the first career disaster specialist to head the agency, reorganized FEMA. "The rebuilding of FEMA cannot start until it is born again as the independent agency we now know it must become again."

Norton's full statement follows.

After spending billions of dollars on homeland security and more than \$15 billion on first responder grants since September 11, 2001, it has become more than obvious what Hurricane Katrina revealed cannot be debated: that we are unprepared for a major natural disaster or a terrorist attack. Investigations including those by the House, Senate, White House, the General Accountability Office and the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have all identified the spectacular magnitude of the failures and a dysfunctional system of disaster structure and management. The problems of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) are so pervasive and deep that there is almost no confidence the agency even now can meet the hurricane season due next month.

Therefore I am joining the chairs and ranking members of the full committee and subcommittee of which I serve as subcommittee ranking member to introduce the Restoring Emergency Services to Protect Our Nation from Disasters (RESPOND) Act of 2006 today. The competing priorities of the terrorism prevention mission of the Department of Homeland Security and the disaster management mission of the FEMA were major factors in the rapid decline of FEMA's ability to coordinate the federal response to Hurricane Katrina. Because of FEMA's absorption by the larger Department, we saw the transfer of FEMA's preparedness functions to other entities within the DHS, serious loss of experienced professional personnel, and the reduction of FEMA's funding for equipment, training and exercises. Given the overriding and high visibility of terrorism after 9/11, FEMA's inadequate response to a large scale disaster became virtually inevitable.

Our subcommittee had five FEMA hearings or markups after the FEMA Homeland Security Act of 2002 transferred all of the statutory functions of the Stafford Act from the Director of FEMA to the Secretary of DHS, when FEMA was further delegated to the Undersecretary for Emergency Preparedness and Response (EP&R). Although I am a member of the Homeland Security Committee and was an advocate of the creation of the Department, I cannot turn away from the irrefutable evidence of what happened and why. Therefore, I have concluded reluctantly that FEMA must be removed from DHS to help enable it to once again become the professional, quick recovery agency it became in the 1990s.

The problems were aided and abetted by administration terrorism funding priorities that I do not expect to change. To cite an example, at our September 24, 2003 markup, I cautioned about challenges to hazard mitigation or prevention activities that were clear then. States and local officials were complaining that the increased emphasis on terrorism had kept them so busy trying to keep up with security alerts, overtime costs, and the myriad of terrorism-related grant programs that hazard mitigation, which we know might have led to a better response to Katrina, was in steep decline. Yet the Administration in its FY2003 budget request had proposed the elimination of the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program

(HMGP) and the FY 2003 Omnibus Appropriation Bill, over the objections of our committee and various stakeholders, and reduced the mandated percentage of HMGP funds from 15 percent to 7.5 percent. The reduction so inhibited the ability of the state and local governments to effectively carry out preparations for hazards and so dramatically increased the cost of natural disasters that we restored funding levels back to 15 percent at our next markup.

The result of short sighted shifts of funding from FEMA in favor of terrorism matters is clear in the catastrophic aftermath of Katrina. FEMA has suffered rather than benefited from its absorption into DHS. Although the exact numbers are disputed, the agency's core budget for disaster preparedness has been cut every year since it went into DHS. Its staff has been reduced by 500 positions. Hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and other natural disasters come on cue every year yet three of every four local preparedness and first responder grants have gone for terrorism-related activities. The GAO reports that 75% of next year's grants are similarly targeted to terrorism despite many local official complaints that the most urgent need is for natural disasters and accidents. Some considerable direction of funding to terrorist prevention was fully justified after 9/11, but we now know that billions of dollars were not distributed on a risk basis. We also know, not only from Katrina but also from the way FEMA was overwhelmed by four hurricanes in Florida in 2004, that "all hazards" has become a bureaucratic slogan. And we have known that FEMA was in complete disarray at least since the Florida experience in 2004.

FEMA has apparently regressed to the hapless and inefficient agency it was before James Lee Witt, the first career disaster specialist to head FEMA in 1993, reorganized and energized the agency and was praised for FEMA's recovery response at the time.

Title I of the RESPOND Act of 2006 therefore establishes FEMA as an independent cabinet level agency. The agency will have a Director and Deputy Director with real experience in the emergency field. Title II of the bill will strengthen and enhance FEMA's core capabilities such as its workforce, logistics, communications capabilities, and response teams. Title III will enhance disaster preparedness at all levels of government by establishing a National Emergency Preparedness System that will involve states and localities in the development of the system; set clear goals and target capability levels of emergency preparedness; assess capability levels regularly; direct resources toward reaching capability levels; and ensure that lessons learned and best practices are incorporated into future planning.

The RESPOND Act will restore vital functions to FEMA and will strengthen and enhance it in an effort to give our nation the best and most effective national emergency management system. The rebuilding of FEMA cannot start until it is born again as the independent agency we now know it can become again.